

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The perceived fairness of work–life balance policies: A UK case study of solo-living managers and professionals without children

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Abstract

The ability to reconcile work and private life is a matter relevant to all employees, though not all may seek “balance.” Research indicates that organisational work–life balance policies and flexible working arrangements often focus on the needs of working parents, with one potential outcome being “family-friendly backlash,” or counter-productive work behaviour from those without caring responsibilities. This paper analyses data from 36 interviews with childless solo-living managers and professionals, exploring perceptions of fairness in relation to these policies. In contrast to previous studies, despite recognising a strong family-care orientation in employer provisions, perceptions of unfair treatment or injustice were not pronounced in most cases, and thus there was little evidence of backlash/counterproductive work behaviour. The paper uses and develops organisational justice theory to explain the findings, emphasising the importance of situating individual justice orientations within perceived organisational policy and wider regulatory contexts. It also emphasises the importance of evaluating fairness of work–life balance policies and flexible working arrangements in relation to other aspects of the employment relationship, notably opportunities for career development and progression.

KEYWORDS

fairness, flexible working arrangements, legislation, organisational justice, solo living, work–life balance

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Work–life balance (WLB) can be defined as an individual having “sufficient control and autonomy over where, when and how they work to enable them to fulfil their responsibilities both inside and outside paid work” (Visser & Williams, 2006, p. 14). The concept has relevance to all employees, but research indicates that organisations construct policies that narrowly define the life aspect and, in doing so, explicitly or implicitly prioritise the needs of employees with childcare and other family care responsibilities (Hoffman & Cowan, 2008; Kinman & McDowall, 2009; Smithson & Stokoe, 2005). This has been linked to “family-friendly backlash” (Rothausen, Gonzalez, Clarke, & O'Dell, 1998) and in academic literature, the concept of counterproductive work behaviour (CWB) (Beauregard, 2014), whereby employees without children react negatively to perceived unfairness.

This paper utilises organisational justice theory (Greenberg, 1987) to understand a complexity that emerged in a study of the WLB experiences of solo-living and childless managers and professionals in the UK. Participants experienced a number of work–life challenges, some but not all of which were specific to their solo-living situation (Wilkinson, Tomlinson, & Gardiner, 2017). They also commonly reported organisational policies that prioritised the needs of working parents. Despite this, there was little evidence of backlash/CWB. Whereas absence of CWB may not appear immediately concerning, this issue has direct relevance for HR professionals. If groups of employees experience WLB challenges but are overlooked within existing policy, then employee wellbeing and sense of fairness may be compromised. There may also be negative consequences for organisational functioning (Beauregard, 2014). Furthermore, the design, content, inclusivity, take-up, and commitment to WLB policies and flexible working arrangements (FWAs) might be limited or unsuccessful.

Perception of “fairness” is a key focus of this paper and refers to the belief that an individual holds about how they are treated in relation to others. Fairness can be articulated in a number of ways. In studies of organisational justice, focus on distributive justice (DJ) in terms of need, equity or equality, procedural justice, and interactional justice (IJ) illustrates the multiple ways fairness can be constructed within an organisational context. Given this complexity, perceived fairness might be constructed in shared and/or contested ways. For example, it can be the result of individuals being treated in the same way as a comparator or treated differently when there are justifiable grounds to do so. This paper explores the justice perceptions of 36 young- to middle-aged solo-living managers and professionals working a variety of occupational contexts in relation to WLB and FWAs, and the relationship between these perceptions and CWB.

The paper argues that the WLB of solo-living managers and professionals without children matters and that organisational efforts to facilitate employee WLB might be failing in their purpose by overlooking the needs of this group. The paper contributes to research on organisational justice by arguing that perceptions of fairness of WLB policies and FWAs need to be examined in relation to other aspects of the employment relationship and that macro-level (regulatory) context shapes individuals' assessments of fairness. The following complexities are also foreground: Equality, equity, and needs can be distinct or at times overlapping frames of reference; the significance of different types of justice assessments can be influenced by perceptions of relevance and legitimacy; and time as well as financial resources and rewards (the focus of most organisational justice studies) should be better acknowledged in fairness assessments.

In the next section, we review the literature charting the shift from work–family policies to WLB and, in doing so, set up the question of whether this shift in terminology represents a genuine change in policy and practice with the aim of providing a more inclusive work life agenda. Following this, the paper outlines the frame of organisational justice before turning to methods, data analysis, and findings.

2 | FROM “WORK–FAMILY” TO “WORK–LIFE” BALANCE

Family-friendly policies emerged in the 1970s, associated with increasing female labour force participation (Lewis, 1997) and the ability of working parents, particularly mothers, to manage work commitments alongside parental responsibilities (DfEE, 2000; Gambles, Lewis, & Rappaport, 2006). A number of demographic and social changes resulted in greater

heterogeneity in the UK workforce and a drive for a more inclusive WLB agenda. Key developments include a single lifestyle being more socially acceptable (Duncan & Phillips, 2008), cohabitation and marriage occurring later in life (Simpson, 2005), reduced fertility levels and higher rates of divorce and plurality of family forms (Finch, 2002), couples opting to “live apart together” (Duncan & Phillips, 2010)—meaning each partner lives independently, despite being in a committed partnership—and increased geographical mobility. Whereas the focus in many research studies on WLB remains the ability to reconcile work with family life (Kelly et al., 2014; Lee, Kossek, Hall, & Litrico, 2011; Seierstad & Kirton, 2015) or analyse the ways in which work and family conflict occurs (Gerstal & Clawson, 2014), there is evidence of greater focus beginning to emerge on working lives, which emphasises the importance of other aspects of WLB including friendships, leisure, sports, fitness, and the need for adequate rest from demanding jobs in relation to the wellbeing of workers (Pedersen & Lewis, 2012; Chatzitheochari & Arber, 2012).

However, a question remains over the extent to which research indicates a meaningful shift in policy and practice towards a more inclusive agenda at the workplace level. For example, Hoffman and Cowan's (2008) investigation of the construction of work–life issues on organisational websites in the US revealed images of traditional family life, involving two parents, children “and the occasional elderly parent” (p. 236). In the UK, Kinman and McDowall (2009) and Kossek, Ollier-Malaterre, Lee, Pilcher, and Hall (2015) note that whereas examples of inclusive practice exist, the cultures of many organisations still focus primarily on helping employees meet caring responsibilities, or make assumptions that whereas policies are gender neutral in design, policies in reality cater for working parents and specifically working mothers (Smithson & Lewis, 2004).

In the UK, one explanation for the presumed family-focus of WLB initiatives is the way in which legislative rights have focused primarily on the needs of working parents and carers until very recently. Whereas, for example, the UK working-time directive applies to most workers, much UK-based legislation has been designed to facilitate reconciliation of work and life for those with child and/or other caring responsibilities, examples include paternity leave; adoption leave; time off for dependants; parental leave; and until April 2014, the right to request flexible working. Eikhof et al. (2007, p. 328) attribute the family focus to the notion that although governments talk about equality, their ultimate aim “is not having better lives but breeding new lives; more specifically the reproduction of the future labour force at a time when birth-rates are in decline.”

Often work–life challenges are perceived, certainly for managers and professionals, about time management issues and reduced workloads (Kossek et al., 2015). Whereas some authors have argued strongly that financial matters are of equal concern in working-life challenges (Gerstal & Clawson, 2014; Warren, 2015), time understandably looms large in research on WLB and conflict in organisational contexts.

Work–life challenges of solo-living employees without children exist, which are both similar to and different from those experienced by employees with children. These relate to both financial and time-based concerns. For example, recent research (Wilkinson et al., 2017) found that solo-living employees without children experienced four distinct challenges. The first related to assumptions about their work and nonwork time. They felt that their organisations and colleagues assumed they could work longer hours, as they did not have as many demands on their time outside of work as parents do. On the contrary, they spoke of specific types of time demand often as a result of their solo-living status, including having sole responsibility for the household and in the absence of cohabiting family, the need to invest time and energy in friendships for personal and emotional support and wellbeing. In terms of developing intimate relationships, many felt that work commitments (long hours and mobility demands) made forming relationships more difficult.

The second challenge concerned perceptions of the legitimacy of their WLB and, in particular, comparisons made between the legitimacy of family care-based responsibilities and those connected to solo living (friendships, household tasks, and leisure-based activities). The third challenge concerned a lack of support solo-living managers and professionals reported both emotionally and financially. In particular, concerns were voiced about there being no financial safety net or shared responsibility for mortgages and other major household costs. The final issue raised was a feeling of heightened work-based vulnerability. Work was often considered the central pillar of their identity, notably in the absence of a partner or family in the household. With the absence of emotional support, work was at times all-consuming and difficult to detach from, especially when experiencing work-based stress or strain.

Once the work–life challenges of solo-living employees are acknowledged alongside recognition that WLB policies still prioritise the needs of working parents, there is cause for concern as to scope for potential workplace conflict between those who use and those who do not use WLB and FWAs. For example, there is some evidence that employees without children find WLB policies and FWAs unjust in two ways, first in terms of inequity in access to policies (Darcey, 2005; Darcy, McCarthy, Hill, & Grady, 2012; de Janasz, Forret, Haack, & Jonsen, 2013) and second in terms of how the use of policies by certain individuals impacts on co-workers who do not. In relation to the latter, there are reports of increased workload and working hours for co-workers, increased requirements to travel and/or holiday restrictions due to having to compensate at work for colleague absence or specific working patterns granted in relation to care commitments (Collyer, 2009; Hayashi, 2001). In the qualitative element of Beauregard's (2014) research on perceived fairness of WLB, more than half the sample (16/26) mentioned negative emotions resulting from perceptions of unfairness, including annoyance, disappointment, and frustration (p. 780). We return to these issues in our analysis.

As a result, the phenomenon of “family-friendly backlash” has been identified, mainly in U.S. media and social commentary as well as more recently in academic literature under the term of CWB (Beauregard, 2014). The latter is described as “a means of retaliating against the organisation or of expressing the strain produced by unfair work practices” (p. 776). This can manifest in various ways, for example, in terms of action—formal complaints or grievances to HR (Flynn, 1996; Wells, 2007) and/or behavioural change in terms of reduced organisational citizenship behaviour (Kossek & Van Dyne, 2008). It can also take the form of “co-worker backlash” (Korabik & Warner, 2009), for example, by withholding assistance to facilitate use of WLB/FWA policies or less-targeted responses, which might include general decline in interpersonal relationships at work with other employees and managers (Beauregard, 2014). This brings us to the field of organisational justice.

3 | ORGANISATIONAL JUSTICE, WLB, AND FWAS

Perceptions of fairness in an organisational context have been studied using the theory of organisational justice (Greenberg, 1987). This theory establishes how individuals make judgments about what is fair or unfair in terms of organisational policies and/or practices, and the consequences of those judgements. When employees perceive policies and/or practices to be fair, observed positive outcomes include increased trust and commitment, improved job performance and customer satisfaction, and reduced conflict (Cropanzano, Bowen, & Gilliland, 2007). Organisational justice theory has been utilised extensively to evaluate a range of organisational dynamics, policies, and practices. In recent years, these have included talent management (Gelens, Hofmans, Dries, & Perpermans, 2014); high-performance work systems (Heffernon & Dundon, 2016); pay and rewards (Caza, McCarter, & Northcraft, 2015); selection practices (Patterson, Zibarras, Carr, Irish, & Gregory, 2011); and performance appraisal (Cheng, 2014; Linna et al., 2012). Attention has also been given to how perceptions of fairness are gendered (Jepsen & Rodwell, 2012). Whereas attention has been paid to perceptions of fairness in relation to WLB and FWAs (Beauregard, 2014; Fujimoto, 2014), to our knowledge, no studies explicitly focus on employees who live alone and do not have children in relation to fairness assessment of WLB policies and FWAs.

DJ was the key concern for early studies (Byrne & Cropanzano, 2001), referring to the criteria individuals use when they evaluate whether and the extent to which the allocation of a resource/reward is fair. Deutsch (1975) foregrounds three different rules that individuals can apply when making evaluations of DJ: equity, where it is fair for those who put the most into the system to get most out; need, where it is fair for those with the greatest requirement for the resource to receive the most; and equality, where every individual receives an equal share irrespective of need or inputs.

Whereas DJ remains important, Byrne and Cropanzano (2001) note that DJ has proved hard to attain—especially when linked to financial rewards. As a result, in more recent years, the focus has shifted to other dimensions of organisational justice. Procedural Justice refers to the perceived fairness of the process followed to make decisions, rather than focusing on decision outcomes. IJ consists of two subcategories: interpersonal justice, reflecting the degree to which employees feel they are treated with politeness, dignity, and respect by managers, and informational justice, concerning the adequacy of the explanations provided, in terms of timeliness, specificity, and truthfulness (Colquitt, 2001).

Taking DJ as a starting point, arguably, based on the evidence above, organisational support for WLB and FWAs could be positioned as needs-based, focusing initially on the needs of mothers and later working parents and carers. The change in terminology from “work–family” to “work–life” indicates a shift in discourse regarding who and why individuals need and seek support. Equality is also foreground with recognition that WLB policies and access to FWAs should be universal. This shift in focus is evidenced by the 2014 extension of the UK right to request flexible working to all employees with 26 weeks’ service.

Compared to need- and equality-based perspectives, the equity perspective is harder to conceptualise in relation to WLB. It is important to discuss however, because equity is the dominant DJ principle in organisational settings (Deutsch, 1975, p. 143). The equity principle refers to an individual’s assessment of their ratio of “inputs” to “outputs” against those of a comparator. In a work context, the input most commonly used in calculations is performance or skill level (Martin & Harder, 1994). This would mean that those judged to have higher performance, greater skill or value, might receive greater accommodation in WLB/FWAs (Fagan & Walthery, 2013). Arguably, this principle might apply beyond performance or skill to senior managers and professionals who have greater autonomy to control the timing or location of work (FWAs), or those targeted in retention strategies through reduced load working once they have proved their value to their organisations (Kossek et al., 2015). It could be however that employees conceptualise WLB equity assessments in different ways. Whereas some might consider it fair for superior qualifications or work performance to be rewarded with such autonomy, others might view equity as long working hours being rewarded by development opportunities and career progression (Scholarios & Marks, 2004)—especially in cultures where “face time” is the proxy for performance. Hence, it is critical to note that multiple perspectives on the same principle can coexist.

According to organisational justice theory, a sense of injustice is likely to occur where stakeholders utilise (tacit or explicit) principles of assessment as workers—whether parents, carers, or solo-living employees with wider personal- and community-based commitments—which conflict with those of organisational policy developers. Young (1999) found that employees applied different DJ principles when assessing the fairness of work–life programmes; that principles might be subject to different interpretations (for example, the definition of “need”—being seen by some as about care responsibilities but by others more broadly); and that an employee’s personal perspective could be at odds with that of the organisational approach, each potentially resulting in a sense of injustice. Young (1999) did not explore potential causes of different principles and interpretations. In contrast, this study explores the construction of fairness evaluations made by solo-living employees and seeks to uncover some of the factors that influence them.

4 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The paper derives from an exploratory study of the WLB experiences of solo-living, childless young- to middle-aged managers and professionals. The definition of solo living was taken from the UK Census, referring to one person living alone or a person who does not live with a partner or family member, and does not share a living/sitting room or at least one meal a day with another resident of a shared building (e.g., a house-share). The experience of this cohort was of interest because despite being largely neglected in the literature on WLB, they make up a growing proportion of the UK workforce. According to the Office for National Statistics, 7.7 million people lived alone in 2016, with 28% of households containing one person (ONS, 2016). In terms of the working age population, Palmer (2006) noted that in the 30 years preceding his research, the number of solo livers trebled—from 1 million to 3.5 million—whereas the number of multiadult households remained largely unchanged. Jamieson and Simpson (2013) note that in Northwestern countries, about 22% of all men aged 30–59 live alone, as do 17% of women. Whereas for some, the living condition may be a transitory state; for others, it is a more permanent experience. Wasoff, Jamieson, and Smith (2005) utilised The British Household Panel Survey to explore patterns in living alone between 1991 and 2001. They noted that 30% of those who had ever lived alone had done so throughout the 10 years covered. Whereas the numbers of those living alone who have never had children is not known, rising overall levels of childlessness (ONS, 2012) and delayed childbearing among managers and professionals (ONS, 2015) suggest that it is likely to be significant.

Managers and professionals are the focus of this study because solo living in the working-age population is pronounced in these socio-economic groups (Hall, Ogden, & Hill, 1999; Jamieson & Simpson, 2013). They are also one of the occupational groups most susceptible to work–life conflict (Hooker, Neathey, Casebourne, & Munro, 2007; Milliken & Dunn-Jensen, 2005). The age group of 24–44 years mirrors the parameters set by Jamieson and Simpson (2013, p. 8) in their study of solo living in Scotland: “the ages conventionally associated with being partnered, giving birth and nurturing the next generation.” Furthermore, this age group, while not having children themselves, were likely to work alongside others who did.

A social/activity organisation in the North West of England was initially utilised for attracting suitable participants. The organisation runs a calendar of events in Manchester, and marketed itself (on its website) to individuals in their 20s to 50s wanting to meet new people, including those relocating to the city for business, and singles looking to meet a partner. As such, it was thought that the membership demographic might prove fruitful for this project. Permission was granted by the organisation founder to attend some events and provide information on the project to members attending. Most participants were recruited directly from the initial call, but the sample was boosted via a snowballing strategy. The final sample achieved diversity in participant profile in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, occupation, and employment sector (see Table 1). Nearly all respondents at the point of interview were single (31/36) though three participants had very recently started (noncohabiting) relationships but drew extensively on their experiences of single life.

Data collection was carried out in 2012 by the lead author and comprised of one interview with each participant (typically 90 min, 36 interviews generating over 50 hr of fully recorded transcribed data) in a location of their choice. The interview comprised two parts and started with an open narrative section designed to draw out each participant's story of their work–life history and allow for their own frames of reference. This was taken directly from the Biographical Narrative Interpretive Method (BNIM) (Wengraf, 2011):

As you know, I'm interested in how people reconcile their work and their lives outside of work. Can you please tell me your story, all of the events and experiences you feel have been important to you personally. Start wherever you like and please take all the time you need. I'll just listen first and won't interrupt, I'll just take some notes. If I have any questions we can return to them once you have finished.

Following BNIM conventions, subsequent questions in this first section were limited to probes designed to generate more information on the opening narrative. Whereas the BNIM approach relegates any preprepared questions to a second interview on a different day, this was integrated into a second stage of the single interview via the completion of a participant information sheet and a semistructured section (exploring issues derived from

TABLE 1 Participant characteristics

Characteristic		Number	Per cent of sample	Characteristic		Number	Per cent of sample
Gender	Male	18	50%	Ethnicity	White/British	27	75%
	Female	18	50%		White/Irish	3	8%
					White/other	3	8%
Relationship	Single	31	86%		Black African	1	3%
	Partnered	5	14%		Asian/Asian British	2	6%
Age	24–29	9	25%	Length of time solo-living	<2 years	6	17%
	30–34	13	36%		2–4 years	11	30%
	35–39	10	28%		4–6 years	13	36%
	40–44	4	11%		>6 years	6	17%
Sector	Public	16	44%	Job role	Manager	17	47%
	Private	20	56%		Professional	19	53%
Highest qualification (equivalent)	Postgrad	16	44%	Salary	£50 k plus	10	28%
	Undergrad	17	47%		£40–49 k	4	11%
	A level	2	6%		£30–39 k	8	22%
	GCSE	1	3%		£20–29 k	10	28%
	None	0	0%		Not stated	4	11%

the research questions and literature review). Of particular relevance to this article were questions about personal WLB experience, organisational WLB provisions, whether a participant had used or attempted to use WLB policies/FWAs, and perceptions of fairness. Key insights into perceptions of fairness were interwoven throughout participant interviews, including the opening narratives.

Data analysis was carried out initially by the lead author, following a four-stage process. It was then corroborated by the second author. Initial analysis was conducted alongside data collection via researcher self-debriefing and the use of memos during transcription. A structured coding process was then undertaken, combining themes emerging from the data with those derived from the literature and research questions (see Appendix A for list of themes). Following Seidel and Kelle (1995, p. 55), the identification of relevant phenomena was followed by the collection of examples and examination to find commonalities, differences, patterns, and structures. In the penultimate stage, each transcript was considered in turn, with a case account being produced around the work–life trajectory and key themes. This allowed for the final stage of analysis in which individual cases were compared and contrasted.

5 | UNDERSTANDING AND AWARENESS OF WLB POLICY AND FWA

The first issue explored was participant's understanding of their organisations' WLB policies. A small majority ($n = 20/36$) said their organisations had WLB policies and when probed indicated that these were primarily used in connection with FWAs to accommodate childcare and family needs. Where policies were not known in detail, examples of flexibility were linked to working parents. For example, Solicitor Isla's (30–34 years) response to a question about her company's policies was a fairly common opening response:

There is flexibility for people with children, they'll let them do remote access or let them do compressed hours. It's not great but there is some flexibility.

Whereas there is no certainty that participants held accurate understanding of the policies in their organisations (see Budd & Mumford, 2006), it is their interpretation that is significant here—as this informs their perceptions about available policies and their fairness.

Fourteen participants said they were unsure whether their company had a WLB policy. Typically, they thought their organisation had a policy but did not know what it covered—often because they felt it was not yet relevant to them personally. This represents an information gap (linked to informational justice) with the prospect of an implementation gap or uneven coverage in access to and use of provisions. Usually, this was not perceived as a concern or organisational failing because participants felt it was their own responsibility to keep abreast of organisational policies, and their choice not to do so. Ed (Business Development Director, 24–29 years) commented, “I think the work–life stuff is mainly designed for people with kids. That's what it's targeted around, it's not really relevant [to me].” Likewise, Seb (Pharmacist, 30–34 years) said, “I've glanced at [the policy] but not read it properly ... I've not really needed to look into it to see if I've got any grounds for changing anything.” As such, there appeared to be a fairly low demand or concern for IJ.

6 | WLB POLICY AND DJ

Nineteen participants spoke primarily within the frame of needs when discussing policy and provision, whereas eight spoke of equality and nine of equity in the first instance. It is important to note that multiple frames of references were found in most conversations. In particular, it was commonplace for equality and need to be coupled. Interestingly, where policies were equality based, examples of utilisation often still related to needs recognised through legislative rights. When Jude (HR Manager, 24–29 years) discussed policies in her organisation, she explicitly referred to an equality-based approach that went beyond legislative provision:

Obviously the law is that [flexible working is] restricted to working carers really, isn't it, so where you've got dependents or children, but at [the Council] it's open to anybody as long as they've got six months [tenure].

When discussing the application of the policy in practice however, she referred to a “legitimate need” being required. Demonstrating an example of this, she spoke of her request to work from home 2 days per week. She primarily wanted to work flexibly due to long commute times and so she could look after her dog but felt her request on these grounds would be rejected. She therefore based her application on a long-term health concern that was “technically covered under the Equality Act.”

Interestingly, most needs-based examples provided beyond care for children tended to be covered by other statutory legal entitlements, such as workplace accommodations for disability or caring for a person with a disability, personal ill-health, or care for a relative with ill-health. Just two respondents spoke of knowing an employee who had a request for flexibility in location or timing of work granted for personal reasons beyond these issues.

Of the eight who thought their organisations' WLB policies were primarily equality-based, most were located in the public sector where respondents spoke of all employees having the right to request flexible working and/or access WLB policies. Two participants thought public sector context was significant, with Jack (Manager, 30–34 years) saying that “there's a bigger burden upon us legally to be an equal opportunities employer than private sector companies.” In contrast, one respondent articulated equality in a different way—in that parents and nonparents were treated equally poorly in her law firm. Exceptions were not made for anyone, regardless of parental or caring responsibilities:

The hours are known for being erratic ... In terms of how people do it ...? Nannies? No, I'd have to get a different job ... It's equal yeah ... the domestic situation, I don't think it has ever been considered [in anyone's workload allocation] (Florence, Solicitor, 30–34 years).

There was also a discussion of equity-based principles. Four participants reported temporal/location flexibility available due to seniority. Often, this was not formalised, but an aspect of a professional environment where senior managers and professionals were able to work with some discretion and autonomy.

The second manifestation of the equity principle was not directly linked to use of WLB or FWAs but connected to the distribution of other rewards or opportunities. Five participants noted that their organisation's WLB policy was needs based but simultaneously said that working long hours and demonstrating personal flexibility influenced opportunities for progression and allocation of high visibility or prestigious projects. Those who worked most received more opportunities, and therefore, perceived equity and fairness was articulated. These frames of reference are discussed more fully below.

7 | FAIRNESS PRINCIPLES AND PERSON/ORGANISATIONAL ALIGNMENT

A puzzle at the heart of this paper is that despite the perception of family-oriented needs-based approaches being dominant in participants' organisations, there was limited evidence of perceived unfair treatment or, as a consequence, forms of CWB. Through the following analysis, we seek to explain this. First, we show that many participants held views broadly congruent with their organisation's approach. Fifteen participants reconciled this issue by noting that career advancement opportunities offset working time sacrifices made, and a further 12 shared the needs or equality-based perspective of their organisation, with some openly sympathising with the pressures of being working parents. Secondly, we show that when participants' fairness principles conflicted with those of their organisations, and a sense of unfairness was articulated (n 9), participants looked beyond the organisation to make sense of/legitimise the context in which they operated, most reconciling their sense of frustration.

7.1 | Congruent equity-based principles

For one group of participants, WLB was not a concern at the time of interview. Fifteen respondents stated that they did not experience work–life conflict or if they did (usually in the form of time-based pressures), balance was not a priority. Most were in the younger age groups and were focused intently on their careers, suggesting long hours were

often rewarded. Ed (Business Development Director, 24–29 years) said part-time colleagues caused inconvenience in terms of his own working-time patterns and cover but added,

I mean in fairness I suppose ... this is where that glass ceiling kicks in ... none of them are in the senior jobs really, because they all get to a certain level and then plateau because they only work three days a week. Do I want to be one of those people who's always having to go at 3:30 pm to pick their kids up? No, I can't see it.

Gerard (Auditor, 24–29 years), spoke directly about the importance of presenteeism and working hours for career progression:

'My line manager, she's got a child, she won't work weekends, which is kind of fair enough, she probably doesn't get involved in social activities as much either... I think ultimately, in a way, it counts against her....I think ambition, leadership qualities, hard work, weekend work [matter]... there is this table of overtime worked. I get the impression that some people like to be near the top of that.'

After citing instances where the needs of working parents were prioritised in access to FWAs in terms of both timing and location of work, Louise (Head of Marketing, 24–29 years) also noted benefits gained from scenarios where more demands were placed on her:

I actually think I have been quite advantaged ... I have been able to take those opportunities. At the same time there is a higher expectation because you don't have them [children] ... I was covering a maternity role for a year in Canterbury, so that was two days a week down in Kent, and there was an expectation that I could do it. If I had children there was no way I could have.

Rarely critical of the way in which career advancement was seen to be underpinned by long hours and availability to work beyond standard hours and locations, those who could saw themselves at a relative advantage in terms of their ability to progress their careers, compared with co-worker parents. This relative advantage offset the disadvantage they perceived in terms of working-time accommodations afforded for others.

7.2 | Congruent needs and equality-based principles

A further 12 participants identified instances of differential treatment, but these were not articulated as unfair—their personal DJ perspectives aligned mostly, if not completely, with that of their organisation. This was evident in direct comments but also the way that different treatment was discussed without criticism. Lee (Radiologist, 35–39 years) matter-of-factly spoke of two different rota systems, with employees with children being allocated to a day-time one:

There are two separate rotas running, there is a shift rota and a day rota. Some of the staff who have been doing that [work] a long time are on the set day rota ... for family reasons more than anything else. A lot of these are married women, they'd have kids

Similarly, Max (Accounting Analyst, 30–34 years) talked of having asked to change his start and finish times slightly to avoid rush hour traffic, and being refused despite noting a female colleague “could leave the office at two o'clock to pick up the baby,” provided she started earlier in the morning. These participants were not critical of these decisions; rather, they often rationalised them in different ways revealing congruence with the organisational approach to WLB.

The first rationalisation was that colleagues with children simply face greater work–life challenges than those without. Adam (Sixth Form Teacher, 35–39 years) illustrates this view. Despite saying that he found WLB “a contest really ... always a conflict” and that heavy workloads impacted on his social life, he compared his situation with that of co-workers with children saying “I don't understand how people who are married with children do it.” Bob (Senior Manager, 35–39 years) similarly said,

When I look at my life versus some of my colleagues and friends who are married with two or three children, they have not got five minutes to themselves, let alone I feel very lucky on the personal time perspective.

The capacity to put oneself in co-workers' shoes revealed often a degree of internal conflict and ambivalence about what is fair or unfair. Discussing her Christmas leave, Stacy, a mental health professional (30–34 years) said,

I had Christmas off this year and I did feel a little bit guilty. I suppose because I have got no family that I go to for Christmas, or I have got no children, and then there will be someone else who's got children and they are working – and I don't know, is that fair?

A second rationalisation relates to the anticipation of having families in the future and the hope of receiving flexibility and colleague support at this time, as other research has shown (Casper & Buffardi, 2004; Grover, 1991). This did not appear a strong factor in this research, however. Only two respondents both mid- to late-thirties spoke of this, one saying that "I'm thinking that one day I'll be a dad, and I would like to be able to turn round to my boss, or be the boss, and turn round and say 'I'm going to pick up the kids'."

Whereas this section has explored the reasons for congruence between individual and organisational DJ perspectives, the next section focuses on dissonance. In particular, it focuses on the group of participants who were critical of the family-focused approach to WLB in their organisations, in the context of competing claims of legitimacy.

7.3 | Conflicting fairness principles

For nine participants, lack of fairness was articulated in connection with organisational needs-based provisions. Participants either suggested that a different DJ principle would be more appropriate, such as support being offered to everyone equally, or suggested that "need" should be more broadly defined. These individuals were vociferous about their own needs as solo-living employees, which they felt were largely overlooked or dismissed by employers and colleagues. These included the need for time to manage a household on their own; time for health, fitness, and wellbeing; and time to see friends and, for many, time to develop personal relationships, care for extended family, or look after pets—which brought a lot of meaning and valued company to those living alone. Suzanne's (Corporate HR Manager, 35–39 years) view that "there's a lack of understanding about the challenges of working when living alone" was shared among this group. Concerns rose about fairness when the needs of working parents only were thought to be acknowledged:

Last Christmas, I worked ... [This year] somebody said to me 'oh we just assumed you'd be working because you won't need leave, will you – for the days between Christmas and New Year – because you've not got any family'. And well actually my mum normally stays between Christmas and New Year ... Normally I take holidays when it is not school holidays ... I do feel really strongly about this as an issue. I do think we are penalised all round. Not only because the preference is always given to those with children but people forget that I have to do absolutely everything in the house, garden, in life, so I cannot be expected to do silly hours and always do the Christmas cover (Charlie, T&D Manager, 40–44 years)

Despite frustrations, very few participants reported taking action in response. Only one respondent spoke of direct action—refusing to take holidays in September to help accommodate holiday demands of colleagues with children:

I used to say, fine, I will stand back from school holidays, having time off then ... But I have totally reversed now. Everyone's off in August, so nothing happens. Like our job is working with accountants, lawyers and credit. Nothing moves. I am almost twiddling my thumbs. Then come September, when I want to take my two weeks off, everyone is recharged and wants to get the deal going ... So it means when I am on holiday I've got to be firing off emails on the blackberry ... So I have said sod it, I want to be off in the quiet time, and the reduction in stress is huge.

He explained that he could do this only because he is now the most experienced person in his team and had the confidence and seniority to make a stand. The findings here somewhat mirror those of Beauregard's (2014) qualitative study, where frustration and disappointment were articulated in the interview, but little overt CWB was reported. Rather, internal attitudes to work were seen to change, with some deteriorating interpersonal relationships reported (p. 780).

Beyond this rare example, when respondents were critical of organisational policy but did not challenge it, their criticism was tempered by a reflection that much organisational policy was underpinned by legislative "rights" for working parents. Reference was made to statutory provision in the case of maternity, parental, and carer's leave and "legitimate" grounds to make care-based applications for the right to request FWAs. Gemma (Clinical Psychologist, 35–39 years), for example, refers to the latter:

I can apply for flexible working hours, and I know I could apply for things like annual hours, but I also get the sense that without having children my manager could legitimately turn round and say no you can't have them.

Whereas a sophisticated understanding of the distinction between legislation and organisational policy was often difficult to tease out in discussions, respondents generally understood that certain groups, in this case, working parents, had greater claim or legitimacy when accessing WLB policies and FWAs.

The second issue concerned perceptions of the legitimacy of different nonwork activities, and the impact this has on sense of entitlement to support. In terms of devoting time and energy away from work, participants thought their nonwork activities were considered less legitimate than childcare, especially as these were often self-oriented and lacking in fixed time commitments. As Charlie (T&D Manager, 40–44 years) stated,

You've no excuse ... Like Amanda will literally be in the middle of a meeting and go 'sorry, gotta go, picking the kids up from school', it's more acceptable. Whereas if I went 'sorry, gotta go', it'd be like 'where are you going?' and if I said 'I'm going running', it's not a legitimate reason for not being in work. A poor little child at school gate, not being picked up by mummy – that's an awful thing, but you needing to get home to do some exercise and not die of a heart attack is not really a legitimate reason.

8 | CONCLUSION

This article examines perceptions of fairness with regards to WLB policies and FWAs among a group of young- to middle-aged managers and professionals who have received little attention in the literature to date: those who live alone and do not have children. Despite reporting WLB challenges, many participants (27/36) revealed an acceptance of WLB policies and FWAs even though they often failed to address their personal needs.

In exploring this puzzle, this article provides useful insights for HR practitioners and, importantly, makes several contributions to research. In terms of practical implications, HR practitioners might benefit from examining existing policies to scrutinise the extent to which they cater for those with WLB requirement beyond care responsibilities and how widely WLB issues are framed. They might ask whether organisational policy mirrors the transition in policy discourse from family-friendly to a more inclusive WLB approach for all employees. Greater communication of changes to policies in line with the 2014 extension of the right to request flexible working would be one step in this direction. In encouraging wider understanding, legitimacy and use of WLB provisions and FWAs, such provisions and arrangements, might become more normalised within the culture of organisations. This could be beneficial to those who feel use of policies impacts negatively on their perceived performance, commitment, or career development prospects (see Lewis, 1997, 2010).

In terms of contributions to research, we argue that perceptions of WLB policy and FWAs should not be studied in isolation. Participants drew on wider reward and opportunity structures to inform a more holistic evaluation of the

fairness of their employment contract. Colquitt and Shaw (2005, p. 119) note that most studies on organisational justice are “context specific,” focusing on the perceived fairness of one specific policy/process, it being much rarer for research to examine fairness involving multiple aspects of the employment relationship. Whereas these individuals recognised that they were not favoured in terms of WLB and FWAs, they were in stronger positions to progress their careers and overall this suited many.

Secondly, we demonstrate the importance of macrolevel contextual factors in shaping individual justice assessments. This not only affects their sense of legitimacy to access policies but also shapes their perceived range of options and capabilities to access to WLB or FWAs (Fagan & Walthery, 2013). Specifically, this paper demonstrates the resilience of a needs-based regulatory approach within organisational contexts, which is informed both by the nature of WLB policies at the organisational level and also perceptions of entitlement. Returning to a question posed in the literature review, although the shift in discourse from work–family to WLB is well established, the application and implementation of such policies at the organisational level has not yet witnessed such a shift.

We also foreground the following complexities using the theoretical frame of organisational justice. First, that equality, equity, and needs can be quite distinct or overlapping frames of reference in assessments of DJ. Second, that time should be acknowledged as a key resource in equity assessments, as something distinct from economic rewards, which tends to be how DJ is typically framed in the existing literature. Finally, the significance of different types of justice assessments can be influenced by perceptions of relevance and legitimacy.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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APPENDIX A

Data analysis themes

Theme	Subtheme
Work–life balance	Definition Positive (WLB) Negative/work-life conflict (WLC) Boundaries Working hours Time flexibility Location flexibility
Relationships	Family Partnerships Friendships Dating
Structural/cultural influence	Work-group Organisation Industry Profession Legislation
Agency	Choice Plans/projects
WLB fairness	DJ: Need DJ: Equality DJ: Equity Procedural justice Interpersonal justice Comparisons/overlap in ref to DJ, IJ and PJ
Achievement	
Chance	
Support	Work Domestic Emotional
Frustration	
Gender inequality	
Assumptions of others	
Legitimacy (and lack of)	
Understanding (and lack of)	